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STRATEGIC POSITION CHANGE AND ELECTORAL SUCCESS

A quantitative study on the consequences of
political position change in Sweden

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Abstract

As new parties emerge in the European political landscape, they force existing parties to reconsider old issues and position themselves on new ones. This research paper analyzes the relationship between electoral support and political parties' position change in two dimensions. While previous research has mostly focused on how position change influence electoral support in general, less is known about how position change on issues part of the primary respectively the secondary dimension influence electoral support. The paper rests on the expectation that parties are ideologically constrained to the issues on their primary dimension, and thus have an easier time responding to public opinion on the secondary dimension issues. In order to test the hypotheses, I have used time series regression analysis, focusing on Sweden, from elections 1982 until 2018. The hypotheses are supported in some of the political parties under study; however, the results are not statistically significant.

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1. Introduction

All throughout Europe, new parties are emerging and experiencing electoral success in the last two decades. The old, established parties have shown large difficulties in combating these new parties finding success in the formerly neglected dimensions of political competition in Europe. As these new parties emerge, old parties have to position themselves more clearly, or change their positions on issues emphasized by the new parties. Cases like this raise the following question: How does altering policy position affect the electoral success of political parties?

Earlier research has already established that mainstream political parties change their positions when new parties emerge and find success in the electorate (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018). New parties bring salience to formerly neglected issues and force the old parties to position themselves on those specific issues. The emergence of new parties also indicate that public opinion may have changed, which also contributes to position changes in the mainstream parties. However, mainstream parties find difficulties changing positions on certain issues due to ideological constraints. Previous studies have shown a differentiation between primary and secondary dimension issues in political parties, which refer to how the issues are connected to the tradition and ideology of the party, as well as their core voter base (Koedam, 2019). Thus, my question for this research paper is how position change on primary and secondary dimension influence electoral support?

While there is a distinction between issues part of the first and second dimension (Koedam, 2019), we know less how this differentiation between dimensions influence electoral success. The focus, so far, has mostly been on the traditional left-right economic dimension of politics, with some studies also taking a social left-right dimension into account (Adams et al, 2006; Polk & Karreth, 2017; Koedam, 2019). One very important aspect of this research is the difference I am to study between specifically the primary dimension and the secondary dimension for the parties. I will use this division of issue dimensions to bring a new perspective into the research, namely analyzing the relationship between position changes in these specific dimensions and electoral support for the party in subsequent elections.

An underlying expectation for this paper is that voters react differently to party's position-change depending on how closely linked the issue is to the identity of the party. That voters do in fact take position changes into account when voting has been shown in previous studies, even going as far as voters being mindful of position changes on different dimensions (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2020). The paper uses statistical analysis to answer its research question,

specifically measuring the differences in electoral support after position changes in either dimension, and subsequently comparing them. The paper focuses in Sweden from the mid-1980s up to today. In order to test the hypothesis, I have used data from Comparative Manifestos Project (CMP). It provides data regarding changes in parties political positions over time, on different issue dimensions/topics. Examples of political topics I have included in the analysis are the party's positions on Environmental Protection, Welfare, Planned/Market Economy, Culture, and many more. I have used time series data which allows to measure position changes over time and test how it affects electoral success.

The results obtained from the time series regression analysis do support the hypotheses in some of the cases; however, the results are not statistically significant. The results are largely ambiguous, and the relationship between the variables seemed to work differently depending on party, with some overlap between some of the parties.

The paper starts off with a *Literature Review*, mapping the previous literature on issues closely connected to my research question. Topics included in the literature review are party movement, voter perception and reaction, multidimensionality of issues, and party differences. I then go on to explain my expectations, the causal mechanism, and my thought process based on previous literature in the *Theory and Hypothesis*-section, along with choice of case and time period in the *Case Selection*-section. The *Variables, Data and Method*-section then more intricately explains the independent and dependent variables, how they are measured, and how the analysis is performed. I explain the outcome of the regression analysis in the *Results*-section, which shows no significant relationship among variables. I end the paper with a *Conclusion*-section, where the paper as a whole and the implications of the indistinct results are discussed.

2. Literature review

To start off this paper, a thorough mapping of the conclusions of earlier studies is needed. The earlier research area is addressed in order to provide a framework for the expectations and the method in this paper. I start off with research concerning the movements of parties and the positioning of the voter base.

2.1 Party movement and voter positioning

A pioneer in the research on party competition, Downs (1957), claims that the majority of voters are located in the center of the political scale. This implies that an effective strategy for gaining electoral support can be to move towards a more moderate political position. Downs (1957) claim that voters in multi-party systems are much more likely to be swayed by considerations central to the party competition, i.e. policy and ideology, than in two-party systems. This has large implications for studies on multi-party systems, since voters may be more inclined to change their votes if and when parties in these systems undergo position changes. Position-changes have also been shown to be an important factor in the relationship between political parties and the electorate, as parties are able to represent the opinions of the public via policy changes (Wlezien, 2004). Politicians and political parties have much to gain from being responsive to public opinion changes, and to a certain extent they do also follow these changes via policy-change (Wlezien, 2004). However, the responsiveness of politicians has been shown to differ between different political issues, depending on the responsiveness of the public to these specific issues. This shows an awareness of the importance of specific issues, which in turn makes it possible for policymakers to adjust their policies to the liking of the public (Wlezien, 2014). This makes an interesting case for this paper, as it shows that politicians are aware of what the public want and are then able to reach out and adjust their policies. It also shows that parties are cognizant to the differences in how the electorate perceives certain issues, perhaps depending on certain issue dimensions. This specific issue of research, however, is not without its debates. O'Grady and Abou-Chadi (2019) claim that when measuring the response of political parties to public opinion, no effect can be found in their analysis of 26 European countries between the years of 1981 and 2016. This is found to be true when analyzing over four distinct issue dimensions, which is a troubling result for democracy, since many deem public responsiveness in parties as one of the most important parts of democracy (O'Grady & Abou-Chadi, 2019). There are contradicting results about public opinion and how policymakers adjust their policies. It also opens up interesting opportunities for new studies conducting

research on these types of questions, especially those who regard the relationship between party position changes and voter response.

Another important strand in literature regarding to when and how parties change their policies is the emergence of new parties in the parliament. According to Abou-Chadi and Krause (2018) mainstream parties are inclined to change their positions towards that of niche parties in order to keep the niche party from stealing votes on that particular issue. This is most often done on secondary dimension positions, for example position regarding immigration (Abou-Chadi & Krause, 2018:2). This has been shown specifically response to the emergence of radical right parties in Europe but is thought to be generalizable to the competition between other types of parties too. However, less it is known how parties position change on immigration and other type of first- and second-dimension issues influence voters vote choice and parties electoral success.

2.2 Voter perception and reaction

That voters do in fact take position-changes into account when voting, at least in part, has been established by earlier research (Bowler, 1990; Polk & Karreth, 2017; Adams et al, 2006). However, voters do not instantly react to changes in position but need time to react and perceive changes made (Bowler, 1990: 69). That voter reaction may be lagged then has to be taken into consideration when analyzing position-changes. Another important point is that voters tend to prefer parties with a so called “brand name” in specific issues, i.e. that with a choice between two parties with more or less the same policy-position on an issue, voters tend to vote for the party that has held this position the longest (Bowler, 1990:67). This has implications for how voters may react to changes in the dimensions put forward in this paper, as changes in core issues may offset this dynamic while parties may not be able to gain as many vote-shares as expected if other parties already “own” the topic of discussion. Voters have also been shown to take secondary dimension positions into account when voting, as shown in Abou-Chadi & Wagners’ paper (2020) on Social Democratic parties secondary dimension positions. This is shown in the Social Democratic party, where working-class voters and highly educated middle-class voters, the two largest voter groups for the Social Democratic parties, largely agree on primary dimension issues, while at the same time disagreeing on secondary dimension positions. This makes it hard for the Social Democratic parties to position themselves on the more culturally and socially targeted issues, i.e. the secondary dimension issues for Social Democratic parties (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2020: 249-250). Abou-Chadi & Wagner (2020)

show that the Social Democratic parties that has failed to alter their positions to fit the voters with more progressive secondary dimension positions have lost electoral support compared to parties that have stuck to their old ways. That voters do in fact take position-changes into account when voting and also accounting for issues on different dimensions opens up possibilities for studies which show how voters react to party's position changes, especially pertaining to these separate issue dimensions.

2.3 Party Differences and Multidimensionality

Research done on the relationship between parties' policy shifts in Western Europe and their electoral support claim that large, established, "mainstream" parties often moderate their policies to match the opinions of the public. In doing so they may gain electoral support from the more centrist voters (Adams, Clarke, Ezrow & Glasgow, 2006). Niche parties, however, often lose support in the electorate when moderating in the same way as mainstream parties which shows an interesting distinction between the voter bases of mainstream parties compared to niche parties (Adams et al. 2006). Research done on the implications of moderation, specifically regarding the Social Democratic parties, show that moderation can be effective as a short-term party strategy, winning electoral support in the immediate elections following the change (Karreth et al., 2013:814-815). However, this can lead to a serious loss of support in the long run, since it dismantles the continuity of the party and undermines its position as a coherent and consistent political organization, especially pertaining to its ideological core topics (Karreth et al., 2013:814-815). Parties moving to the center risk losing their core voter base to parties staying on the flank, while they risk losing centrist voters in subsequent elections, since they have no connection to the party (Karreth et al., 2013:815). This shows an interesting connection between the change of political parties and their electoral support, where specifically moderation seem to be a large problem for both mainstream and niche parties in the long term. The topic of multidimensionality has for a while also been a talking point in the research on party strategy and how parties use different strategies in different dimensions to blur or emphasize certain issues and topics (Polk & Karreth, 2017; Rovny, 2012). The complexity of Western European division in political questions also call for studying this political space with multidimensionality in mind (Koedam, 2019:9).

Another division of dimensions in earlier research is the one between pragmatic and principled issue domains mapped out in Tavits (2007) text. This borders on the issue areas chosen for this paper, but with differences in the division of dimensions. The pragmatic issue dimension in

Tavits' text is based on issues where voters value "getting things done", i.e. issues that are interpreted in material terms. The principled issue dimension contains issues that are based in values and principles, e.g. cultural and social dimensions. This follows the division between economic issues and social issues which has been accentuated in earlier research. The interesting distinction that is made in Tavits' paper is that economic issues are part of the pragmatic domain, which in turn is expected to be more open to change, because, Tavits' argues, that economic issues are not part of the party identity, and does not appear as part of political values and ideology. Tavits argues this because voter preferences on economic issues tend to change depending on the economic performance of the country. The way in which certain dimensions are regarded as pivotal to keeping continuity and consistency in regard to the party identity shows a precedent for these types of studies, with specifically multidimensionality in mind. This gives further legitimacy in focusing on different dimensions of political competition when analyzing the impact of changes on electoral support.

2.4 Outset

There seems to be a difference between voter bases of different parties and how open they are to change and how different dimensions of change in political parties have different implications for their respective party group. This also implies that perceived ideology and continuity in parties have a large effect on electoral support. The research up until now, however, only focuses on major parties, and only on moderation of policies. So far, the research has not fully accounted for any differences between dimensions and questions pertaining to the core questions of the parties in focus. It could be assumed that a political change in a topic close to the core ideology of a party may result in a larger impact on the electorate than if the party was to change their policies in a topic that voters don't immediately relate to the party. Parties may have more freedom in catching voters in questions not ideologically core to their own party. This may seem trivial, but the fact of the matter is that earlier research has not taken this perspective into account. Without a thorough analysis of the difference between change in separate dimensions of party competition it is reasonable to continue the research in this area. That moderation affects the electoral support of the party is more or less agreed upon, and that this is different between mainstream and niche parties. The concern regards the problematic nature of how and why these parties get different responses from doing more or less the same thing: changing their positions on different issues, sometimes even on the same issue, or toward the same policies. The answer may lie in the difference between changes in the party's primary

dimension of issues, i.e. their core issues, or the secondary dimension of issues, issues more on the periphery of their political position. This division of political issues into two separate dimensions may prove to be highly important for the ways in which parties are able to change their positions.

3. Theory and Hypothesis

As formerly mentioned, this paper is studying the relationship between *primary and secondary dimension position changes* and *the electoral support for political parties*. The complete research question is formulated as “*How does political party position change on issues in the primary dimension affect the electoral support of the party, compared to position changes in secondary dimension?*”. The general expectation for this paper is derived from the work of Downs (1957) in how parties generally move towards the center to gain votes. Downs (1957), however, created this theory when most political systems were two-party systems, and as he also points out, voter support in multi-party systems are more susceptible to fluctuate when parties change their positions and policies. When more parties emerge, voters have more choice in whom to vote for, leading to greater representation of more opinions. Thereby I can expect that the party-system of the country plays a large role in how the relationship works. As the case in this paper is Sweden, with a multi-party system, I can expect to see differences between major parties, who may follow the expectation of Downs (1957) more closely, and niche parties, which may follow another logic. In light of the expectations derived from Downs (1957) regarding the central positioning of the voter base, I propose the first hypothesis to be:

H1: Mainstream left and mainstream right parties will increase their vote share if they move towards the center

This prediction may work on two-party systems, but in multi-party systems and when considering other types of parties, other expectations may need to be added. Koedam (2019) points out that parties may be constrained in certain political areas which are core to their voter base and issues that may be closely linked to the identity of the party. If such a constraint exists, where parties find themselves more or less free to change positions based on where the specific issues falls on the division between primary and secondary dimension, it is very important to study the impact this has on electoral support. The primary dimension is usually described as the traditional economic left-right scale, which has long been the most popular way of measuring party positions. The secondary dimension often contains issues of culture, such as immigration, law and order, and environmental politics, however, this differs depending on party type and party family (Koedam, 2019). Karreth et al (2013) also suggest that for example Social Democratic parties do not gain support in the long run when moving towards the center. Furthermore, as the number of parties in the system increase, the positions which parties can assume is restricted, as parties cannot hold the exact same positions on different issues. New parties also signal to the old parties that they have to change, because there are opinions that

had not been represented earlier which now are represented by the new party. This creates a dilemma for the old parties, where they want to chase votes and follow public opinion as it changes, but at the same time keep the core voter base of their own party and keep continuity in the politics. Where are these parties able to change? I argue that the multidimensionality of issues is very important when considering this relationship. Parties may be able to change on secondary dimension issues, where they are freer to change and catch votes. Change on issues in the primary dimension may create an uncertain future for the party, where they risk losing their old core voter base, and undermining their identity as a continuous and predictable ideological unit. In light of this, I pose the following hypothesis:

H2: Political parties will increase their vote shares when they moderate their position on second dimension issues.

The causal mechanism between *position change in parties depending on primary and second dimension issues* and *vote-shares* is here thought to be that voters not only take into account changes in parties when making their decision on election day, but that voters are mindful of what areas of politics that parties change in, and that this has different implications on the attitude towards parties. For instance, depending on how drastic the change is, how close to the earlier stance the change is, and how closely the area of change is connected to the parties' most important topics, i.e. the "primary dimension. In addition, niche parties, single issue parties and radical parties seem to be punished if they moderate their position on their primary dimension issues, as they often cater more to their own core voter base rather than the public as a whole. This division is evidenced by Adams et al (2006) study on the differences between niche parties and mainstream parties. Therefore, a division regarding different types of parties need to be included. As a consequence: **H3: Nonmainstream parties will experience vote loss if they move towards the center on their primary dimension.**

4. Case selection: Sweden

This paper is focused on Sweden and its political parties. This is because of its interesting and perhaps even completely unique historical and current political landscape. Following many of the trends as the rest of Western and Northern Europe, but with a distinct and different approach. Some of the distinctive characteristics that make the political landscape in Sweden unique is mapped out in Hans Bergström's text "*Sweden's Politics and Party System at the Crossroads*" (1991). Here Bergström emphasizes the distinctive characteristic of Sweden as a country in many ways devoid of notable cleavages, such as divisions between religions, ethnicity and language. Bergström poses that the only distinct dimension except for the traditional left-right economic scale are the territorial dimension, the division between urban and rural (p.8). This makes for a compelling case when specifically studying dimensions in political parties. Largely excluding the divisions between ethnicity, religion, and language makes it much easier to perform research on the changes and *electoral support*, since these other dimensions do not interfere with the results and analysis.

In addition, Bergström (1991:8) highlights the relative stability and identity of the party competition over time, where five parties in the Riksdag were the same from the start of equal suffrage in 1921, up until the election in 1988. This makes for an interesting case when studying party competition over time, as the original five parties, which are still in the Riksdag today, have had to change stances and positions quickly when met with competition from other, new parties that have entered parliament since the election of 1988. This allows for an interesting difference between new and old parties, and also highlights the changes that the latter may have gone through to combat the new parties.

Sweden can be considered a *typical* case for European countries due to the fact that Sweden is alike other European countries in many aspects of politics, but only partially unique in other aspects of political competition. That uniqueness can be considered typical is in this case due to the unique aspects of Sweden being an existence of less aspects of political competition which can impact the way in which people vote, than other comparable countries. As formerly mentioned, no clear division exists based on religion, ethnicity, or language. Analyzing a country with these divisions would lead to a hard time finding out what exactly impacts the relationship between position changes and electoral support. Sweden differentiates itself based on its homogeneity and its lack of additional factors of political competition, which means that any result showing itself in this case can also be considered to be generalizable to other

European countries, as long as you consider that these other countries may have more complex dimensions of political competition, e.g. the aforementioned divisions. The time frame of this study is going span from the election of 1982 up until the latest election 2018. This is to capture the aforementioned election of 1988 and capture any eventual changes that came with it. This also captures a fair amount of elections, which makes this type of study possible, since it is dependent on trends over longer periods of time, especially when considering the lagged impact of changes in primary dimension. Since this is a fairly long amount of times, spanning multiple elections, any shortcomings regarding the timespan will hopefully be circumvented. The long timeframe also makes up for the fact that this study only focuses on one case, Sweden.

5. Variables, Data and Method

5.1 Independent Variables

The independent variable is *political party position change in primary dimension*. The operationalization of this variable depends on the party in question, since core issues, i.e. issues in the primary dimension, may differ depending on the type of party. Most parties derive their core values from ideas of economy, such as liberalism, socialism, or Marxism. Therefore, economic issues will be prevalent in many of the party's primary dimensions. The independent variable is derived from the issues in the Manifesto Project database, which maps several different issue topics and every party's position on those issue for every election. The same units and the same data are used for the whole time period, from 1982 until 2018, which gives reliability to the analysis. These topics are coded in how large part they comprise of the specific party's election manifest for the chosen election, in numbers from 0 to 100. The Manifesto Project divides these election manifestos into quasi-sentences, which are then coded as expressing a position on one of the included issues in the data. The numbers represent how many percent of the whole election manifesto document are used to express the specific issue or position. Therefore, high numbers on multiple issues are highly unlikely, and even small changes in score on issues between elections can have large implications for the change in position of the parties. A change in score from 0 to 5 means that the party previously did not even mention the issue in their manifesto, and now use 5% of the quasi-sentences in the whole manifesto to express this certain view, which is a comparably large difference. Since I am using multiple of these issues together to create the primary and secondary dimensions, the minimum and maximum value of these variables are -100 to +100, even though it is unreasonable for any party to change in a capacity that even comes close to any of these numbers. The reason why the variables range in this manner is because of grouping the issues together and measuring the position change of parties.

The primary dimension in earlier research has generally been considered as consisting of the economic left-right dimension (Rovny & Edwards, 2012:56; Koedam, 2019:9). The secondary dimension is often comprised of more culturally and socially targeted issues (Abou-Chadi & Wagner, 2020:248). This distinction can and will differ depending on the type of party. Niche parties may for example have cultural issues as core topics and subsequently primary dimension, while not focusing on economic issues to the same extent. Thus, the distinction between primary and secondary dimensions are going to have to be determined on a case-by-case basis, seeing as no general dimension-division perfectly fits with any parties' core topics.

Therefore, the primary dimension in this paper will be operationalized with specific focus on the economic left-right dimension, while the secondary dimension will generally consist of more cultural and social issues. However, different parties have different primary dimensions from each other, for example the *Centre Party*, previously called *Bondepartiet* (translation: “*Farmers’ party*”), had, and to a certain extent still has, a large focus on the regionalist dimension of politics, representing the rural communities in the urban-rural split. The same can be said about the Swedish Green Party, whose core issues are more based in what is generally considered second dimension to other parties, with a strong focus on environmental politics. The same with the, *Miljöpartiet*, Koedam (2019) argues that different issues are met with different emphasis from the competing parties, and the issues that parties place most emphasis on takes the part of primary dimension. These issues are also the way in which the party is linked to their core voter base (Koedam, 2019:9). It is with these types of political alignments that the classification of issues into either primary dimension or secondary dimension is going to be carried out. The issues included in this paper are as follows:

Table 1- Issues under study:

Law and Order: Positive	Traditional Morality: Positive	Traditional Morality: Negative	Labour groups: Positive	Labour Groups: Negative	Education Expansion	Internationalism: Positive	Internationalism: Negative	Market Economy
Planned Economy	Environmental Protection	Welfare	Agriculture and Farmers: Positive	Culture: Positive	National Way of Life: Positive	National Way of Life: Negative	Multiculturalism: Positive	Multiculturalism: Negative

These are thought to capture most aspects that has been mentioned in previous research, with both economic, cultural and social issues being included. All parties of the Swedish Riksdag is also thought to have multiple of these on their primary dimension. I will now clarify the distinction of primary dimension issues for each of the seven parties included in this paper.

On issues that are divided into two, i.e. Positive or Negative indicators, only one will take part in each party’s dimensions, according to what is closest to the view of the party. For example, Left Party’s primary dimension will include “Labour Groups: Positive”, and thus “Labour Groups: Negative” will be excluded from the Left Party data. This includes all indicators with both a “positive” and “negative” indicator, as well as “Planned Economy”, and “Market Economy”. This is to enable measuring of the party position more correctly, as in their position

of left/right on these issues. Here follows the division of issues into primary and secondary dimension for each party.

Table 2 – First/second dimension issues according to political parties

Party	Primary Dimension	Secondary Dimension
Left Party	Labour Groups: Positive Planned Economy Welfare	Law and Order: Positive Traditional Morality: Negative Education Expansion Internationalism: Positive Environmental Protection Agriculture and Farmers: Positive Culture: Positive National Way of Life: Negative Multiculturalism: Positive
Social Democrats	Labour Groups: Positive Market Economy Welfare	Law and Order: Positive Traditional Morality: Positive Education Expansion Internationalism: Positive Environmental Protection Agriculture and Farmers: Positive Culture: Positive National Way of Life: Positive Multiculturalism: Positive
Liberals	Internationalism: Positive Market Economy Education Expansion	Law and Order: Positive Traditional Morality: Positive Labour groups: Positive Environmental Protection Welfare Agriculture and Farmers: Positive Culture: Positive National Way of Life: Positive Multiculturalism: Positive
Moderate Party	Law and Order: Positive Market Economy	Traditional Morality: Positive Labour Groups: Negative Education Expansion Internationalism: Positive Environmental Protection Welfare Agriculture and Farmers: Positive Culture: Positive National Way of Life: Positive Multiculturalism: Negative
Centre Party	Market Economy Environmental Protection Agriculture and Farmers: Positive.	Law and Order: Positive Traditional Morality: Positive Labour groups: Positive Education Expansion Internationalism: Positive

		Welfare Culture: Positive National Way of Life: Negative Multiculturalism: Positive
Green Party	Planned Economy Environmental Protection Welfare	Law and Order: Positive Traditional Morality: Negative Labour groups: Positive Education Expansion Internationalism: Positive Agriculture and Farmers: Positive Culture: Positive National Way of Life: Negative Multiculturalism: Positive
Christian Democrats	Traditional Morality:Positive Market Economy National Way of Living:Positive Multiculturalism: Negative	Law and Order: Positive Labour groups: Positive Education Expansion Internationalism: Positive Environmental Protection Welfare Agriculture and Farmers: Positive Culture: Positive

All of the seven parties have either the indicator “Market Economy” or “Planned Economy” as part of their primary dimension. This is to capture the previously mentioned strong connection between economic issues and primary dimension. Since most parties are expected to position themselves clearly on economic issues, these issues are included for every party in the analysis. According to Koedam (2019:19) economic issues are dominant for most mainstream parties as well as radical left parties, while cultural issues are most important for radical right and green parties. This partly clarifies the division of certain issues into their respective primary dimensions for the parties, e.g. the Social Democrats’ and Left Party’s’ “Welfare”- and “Labour Groups: Positive”-issues, which connect strongly to economy. The division made for the primary and secondary dimension issues is based partly on how Koedam (2019) claim that economic issues are the most important for most parties and included in the primary dimension, with some outliers, along with the issues regarded as being strongly connected to the core ideology and ideas of the party. For example, the Liberals has, along with the economic issues, strongly positioned themselves and brought salience to issues of Education and International cooperation, for example through being a strong proponent for further EU-involvement. Therefore, the indicators in primary dimension mirror this positioning for the Liberals. The Centre Party has largely been the only party emphasizing the urban/rural split in Sweden, supporting farmers and agriculture, being that they were previously called “Farmer’s Party”.

They have also grown into a strong focus of environmental politics, being the “green” option for right-wing voters. The primary dimension issues of the Centre Party thus mirror the issues that the Party has traditionally been emphasizing. The same logic applies to all other parties included, e.g. Moderate Party = conservative with a strong focus on economy, and also harsher punishments and stronger police force. Christian Democrats = traditional values and preserving the traditional Swedish way of life.

The hypotheses posed in the “Theory and Hypothesis”-section distinguishes between mainstream and nonmainstream parties based on previous research. Thus, a division of what parties in the Swedish context is considered mainstream and not, since there is a difference in expectation based on where a party falls in this division. I here use the same division used in Spoon and Klüvers (2019) text on mainstream party decline. The division is as follows: mainstream parties are social democratic/socialist, conservative, Christian democrat, or liberal parties. Nonmainstream parties are communist, green, agrarian, ethno/regional, national and Euroskeptic parties (Spoon & Klüver, 2019). In the Swedish context this translates to:

Mainstream Parties	Nonmainstream Parties
Moderate Party	Left Party
Social Democrats	Green Party
Christian Democrats	Centre Party
Liberals	

Table 3: Mainstream and Nonmainstream division of parties

5.2 Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is *electoral support*, measured as the *vote-shares* that the parties get in the elections. In order to measure the dependent variable I have used the data from The Swedish Election Authority for elections 2002-2018, and from the statistics agency SCB for elections 1982-1998. The data is presented as percent of the total amount of votes in the given election, and not in absolute vote-shares. This is a continuous variable, which ranges from 0-100. Possible positions on this variable ranges from 4.00%, which is the minimum percentage of votes needed to enter parliament, and up to 100%. In this data the highest number of vote-shares for one party in any of the elections is around 45%, which is the highest amount of vote shares of any party during the years of this study. There is, however, one exception to the minimum of 4% and that is the Green Party which fell out of the parliament in 1991 and then reentered

the next election. This is included even though they at one point were not in parliament to not lose any continuity in the data. The parties New Democracy, which entered parliament for one election only, is excluded because it is impossible to measure changes over time on one election only. The Sweden Democrats are also excluded, since their 3 election terms in parliament is not a large enough range to enable time series regression. The operationalization of this variable is generally non-problematic, as it is the simplest way to see what voters prefer on election day.

5.3 Control Variables

Regarding control variables, the intended control variables were originally supposed to be gender and age variables. Testing for these variables would give a clearer idea of the exact statistical relationship between the dependent and the independent variables, considering both age and gender are expected to impact the way in which people vote. This can be expected because of policies and political ideas regarding these variables, such as politics focused on equality, elderly care, or youth employment, among many others. Seeing as these may play a large part in how people vote, controlling for them would lead to a more reliable and legitimate result. Unfortunately, the inclusion of these variables was not possible because of time constraints and primarily because of a lack of data.

Other control variables that were not possible to include is the perceived valence of parties, which has been a hot topic in the debate on party competition in previous research (Green, 2007), the perceived charisma of party leaders, which has also been found to be important when deciding which party to vote for (van der Brug & Mughan, 2007), as well as the state of the economy, which allegedly also contributes to the decision of voting, especially pertaining to parties in government versus opposition parties (Tavits, 2007). I was not able to include any of these control variables either, because of the aforementioned issues with time and inability to find compatible data. Including these control variables would strengthen the results of the analysis, since these are many of the factors that impact voting and are usually brought up in the literature. Without controlling for these variables, a strong case can be made that these factors impact the relationship and that any eventual statistical relationship found are in part due to these factors interfering with the analysis. Not including them thus leads to a less reliable results.

5.4 Data

The Independent Variables are based on data from the Manifesto Project Database, which covers election manifestos of parties from more than 50 different countries (Manifesto Project Database, n.d.). They are one of the most comprehensive databases regarding party positions and party change. Data from Manifesto Project is very common when conducting studies measuring positions of political parties over time. It is one of, if not the only, datasets related to measuring the positions of parties on specific issues over time, which makes it fit well with this paper. The measurement that the Manifesto Project use to code their variables is included in the Independent Variable-section. Usage of the Manifesto Project is generally straightforward, though there may exist some downsides. For example, the analysis of election manifestos may include more of the idealistic positions that the parties take, and also putting extra emphasis on their core issues. Positions on display in the manifestos may not necessarily reflect the changes the parties go through in the policies and stances they actually take in the parliament. Parties may try to blur their positions on issues that they have not decided their stance on yet, or as a strategy to not divide their own voter-base on polarizing issues, as evidenced by earlier research (Koedam, 2019). Despite these eventual flaws, the Manifesto Project fits well for the questions formulated in this paper, and since there, to my knowledge, exists no other database that maps party positions this clearly, the choice is quite natural.

The data for the dependent variable, electoral support, is fairly uncomplicated. There are two data sources for this variable, The Swedish Election Authority for elections 2002-2018, and the statistics agency SCB for elections 1982-1998. There is a small difference in the data between these two data sources, where the election results for elections 2002-2018 are specified with two decimals, e.g. Social Democrats 28,26% result in the 2018 election. The data for 1982-1998 is specified in only one decimal, for example the Social Democrats 43.2% result in the 1988 election. This does have the possibility of altering the results slightly, but since the differences are so small this should not pose a problem for the reliability of the results.

5.5 Method

In order to test the hypothesis, I will use quantitative method and more specifically time-series regression analysis. This has been the most common way of researching party positions in the earlier literature, and also taking into account the type of data I am analyzing. Only studying one election, or a short amount of time, would not be enough to get a satisfying answer to the question formulation, and thus I have chosen the method of statistical analysis.

The changes in primary dimension are added together with all the other position changes of the issues in the same dimension, to gain an extensive view of the combined effect of changes on primary dimension. The same method is used for the secondary dimension, where all the issues not on the primary dimension for the specific party is clumped together into one single variable, which makes comparison between the two dimensions possible.

I have chosen time series regression analysis because it fits well with my type of dataset and the type of question that I am trying to answer. I have a comparably small population size, with the issue positions of seven different political parties over time. The same unit and the same way of measuring is used during the whole time period, which is positive when performing the analysis. The time period is comparably long, which plays into the choice of time series regression analysis, which is usually used when dealing with analyses over longer time periods (Clarke, 2011). Using time series regression makes it possible for me to compare the statistical relationship between my variables over time in a concise and simple manner compared to other statistical methods.

The potential problem with using statistical analysis in this way is that it does not ensure causality. At any election, voters are expected to take many different factors into account when choosing what party to vote for. Therefore, controlling for other variables is very important when conducting this analysis. The causality of the relationship has been, and will have to be, further theorized to be able to argue that causality between these variables actually exist, and that there is no underlying variable disturbing the statistical connection. Other variables that also impact *electoral support* may interfere with the connection between the two variables in this research paper. Even so, the earlier research done on this connection have been able to reach significant results, which leads to believe that a study done on this connection will still be able to reach reliable conclusions, despite the interference of other variables.

Furthermore, there is also a case to be made for reverse causality in this relationship. Voters may not primarily react to changes that the political parties make, but rather that voters enable or force parties to change their policies. Manza & Cook (2002) claim that the debate regarding this causal relationship contain distinctly mixed arguments. Some studies claim that public opinion strongly dictate the direction of policymaking, while others claim that there is, if any, a miniscule impact of public opinion on the positions of political parties, often claiming that the views of the public are mostly inconsistent and unpredictable (Manza & Cook, 2002). This debate is far too large to map out in this paper, but that there exists a strong case for the reverse

causality of what is expected in this paper needs to be addressed. The reason why I hold to the causality chain that I do in this paper is the large amount of previous studies that show results bordering what I expect my results to be. These previous studies show and argue for this direction of causality which leads me to believe that it at least in part is reasonable to conclude that the relationship works in this way.

The main findings are presented from figure 1 to figure 14. The results are divided according to party focusing on primary and secondary dimension issues for each of the seven political parties under study.

6. Results

The main findings are presented from figure 1 to figure 14. The results are divided according to party focusing on primary and secondary dimension issues for each of the seven political parties under study.

Figure 1: Change in electoral support when changing positions on primary dimension for Left Party.

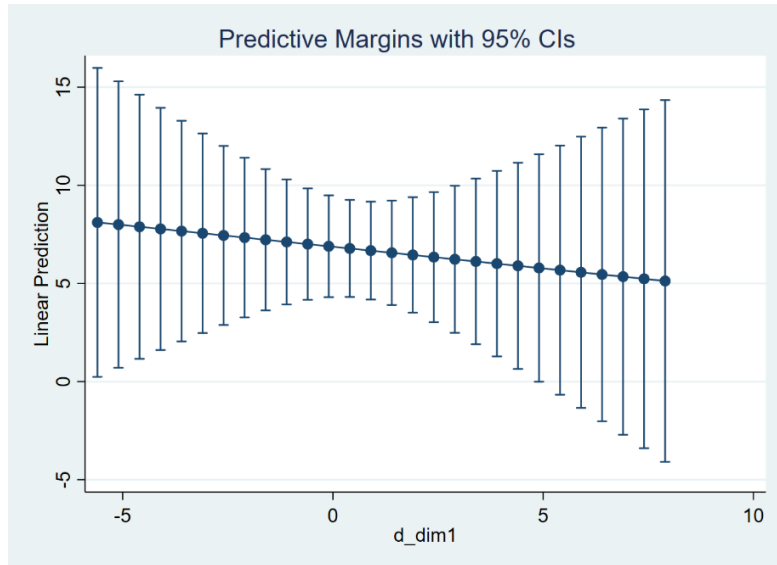
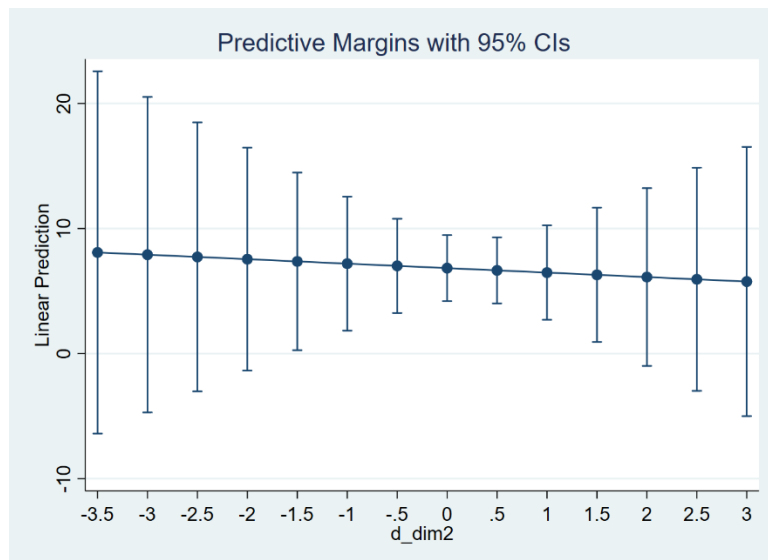


Figure 2: Change in electoral support when changing positions on secondary dimension for Left Party.



According to figure 1, the Left Party does slightly experience a vote loss when they move towards the center on issues part of their first dimension. However, the results are not statistically significant. Figure 2 also shows that the Left Party is experiencing a decrease on

voter support when they moderate their position on issues concerning their second dimension which does not support the second hypothesis. Again, the results are not statistically significant since the confidence intervals overlap.

Figure 3: Change in electoral support when changing positions on primary dimension for Social Democrats.

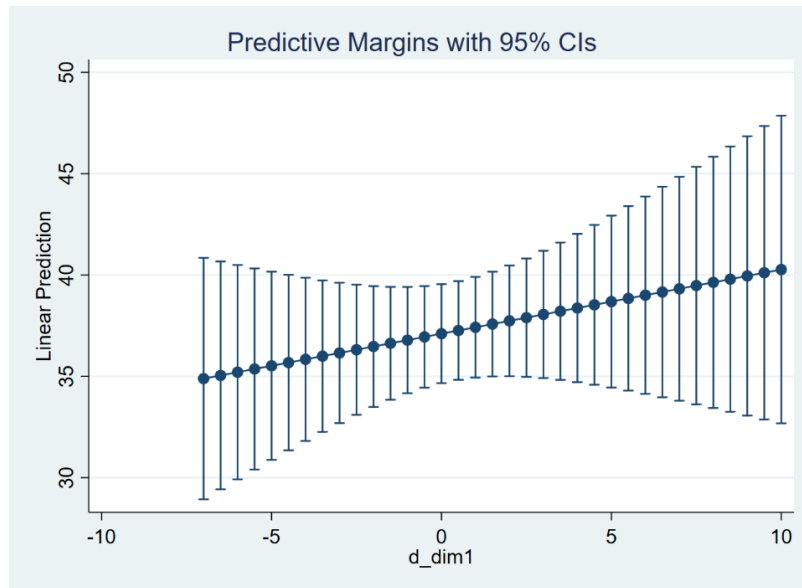
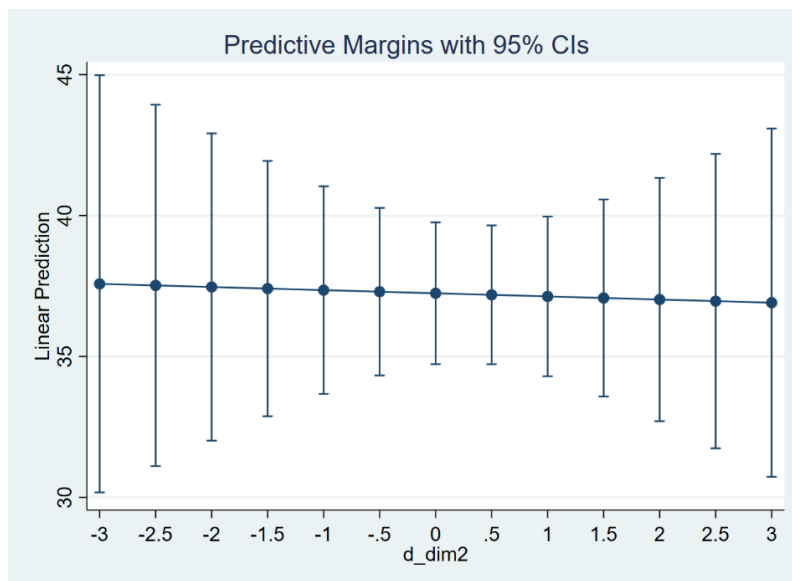


Figure 4: Change in electoral support when changing positions on secondary dimension for Social Democrats.



As can be seen in Figure 3, support for the Social Democrats is increased when moving towards the center on primary dimension issues. This supports hypothesis 1, which expects that

mainstream parties will increase their vote shares when they move towards the center. Figure 4 show a slightly negative effect when moving toward the center on secondary dimension issues. Even though the effect is very small, this contradicts hypothesis 2, which claim that political parties will increase their vote shares when moderating on secondary dimension issues, seeing as the Social Democrats slightly lose vote shares when moderating on this dimension. The results are, however, not statistically significant, as the confidence intervals overlap.

Figure 5: Change in electoral support when changing positions on primary dimension for the Liberals.

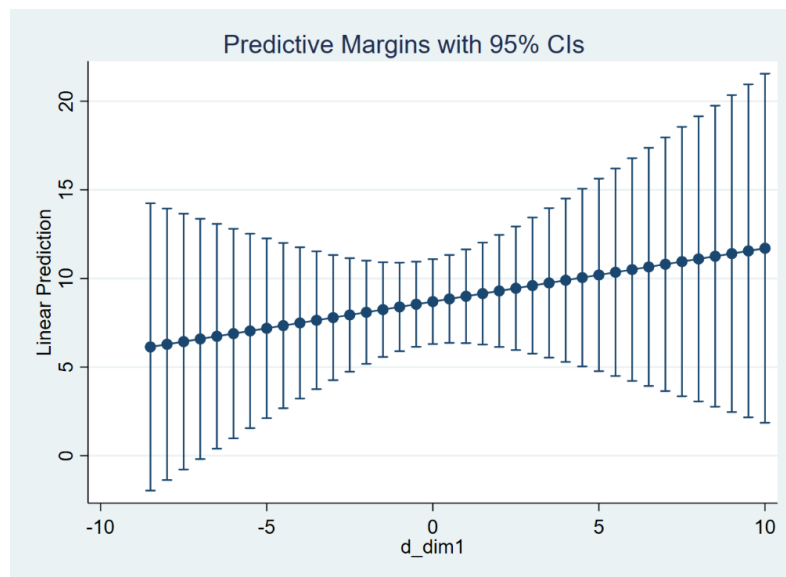


Figure 6: Change in electoral support when changing positions on secondary dimension for the Liberals.

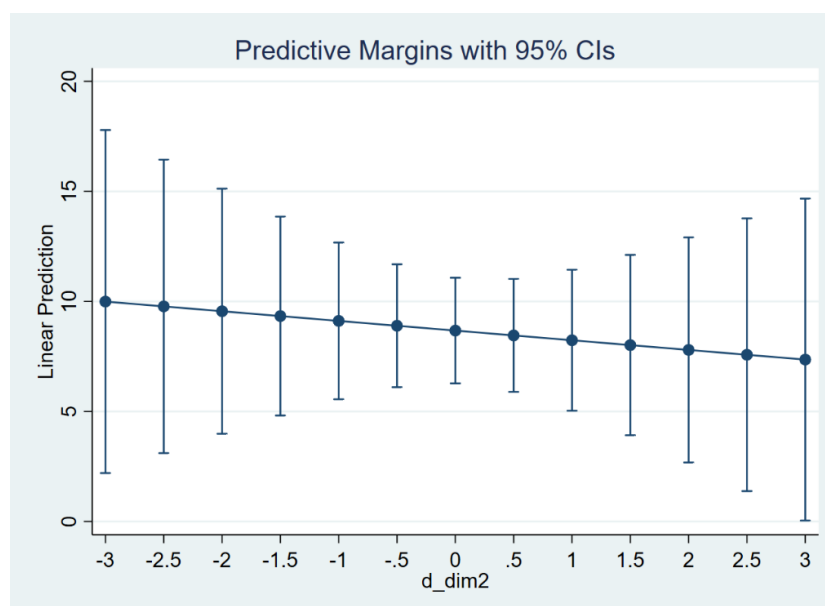


Figure 5 show a fairly steep upwards curve when the Liberals move towards the right on their primary dimension, i.e. they gain votes when radicalizing in this dimension. As the Liberals are regarded as a mainstream party, Figure 5 contradicts hypothesis 1, where the Liberals instead of gaining from moving towards the center, gain from moving away from the center. Figure 6 shows the opposite effect, where the Liberals seem to gain from moving towards the center instead. This supports both hypothesis 1 and 2, where the expectation is that parties will gain votes from moderating on secondary dimension issues. The results are also here statistically insignificant.

Figure 7: Change in electoral support when changing positions on primary dimension for Moderate Party.

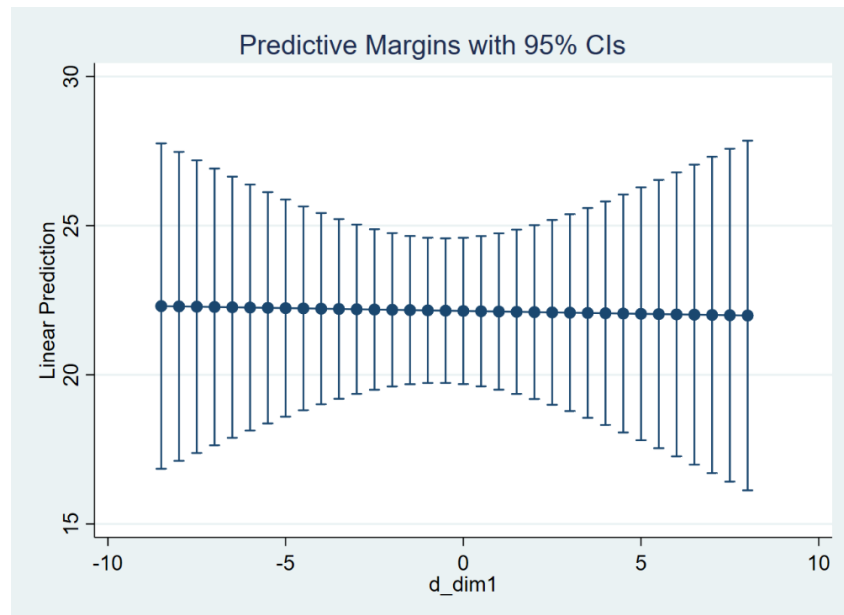


Figure 8: Change in electoral support when changing positions on secondary dimension for Moderate Party.

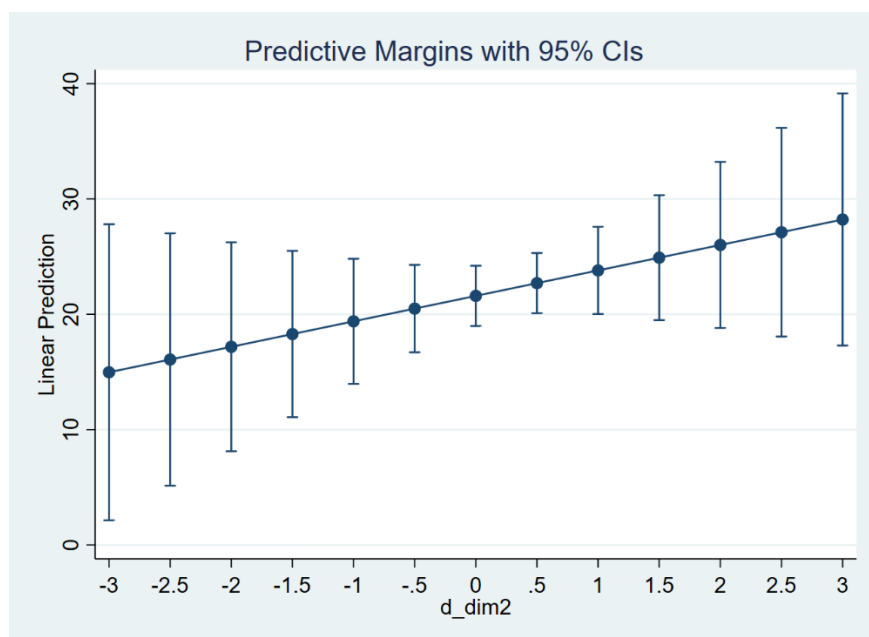


Figure 7 show the Moderate Party's vote shares when positioning themselves on the primary dimension. No certain effect can be distinguished here, as the line is fairly straight. This contradicts hypothesis 1, where the party does not seem to gain or lose vote shares when moderating on this dimension. Figure 8, however, show a stronger effect, where The Moderate Party seem to gain a considerable amount of electoral support moving away from the center on secondary dimension issues. This contradicts both hypothesis 1 and 2, as the

expectation of them is that parties will gain from moderating on secondary dimension issues. The results are, despite a strong effect on Figure 8, still not particularly statistically dependable.

Figure 9: Change in electoral support when changing positions on primary dimension for Centre Party.

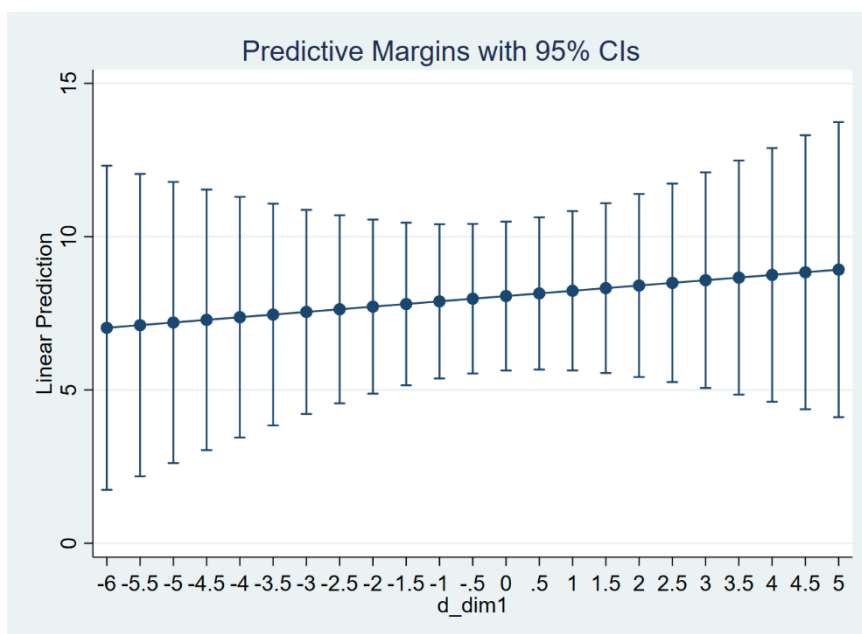


Figure 10: Change in electoral support when changing positions on secondary dimension for Centre Party.

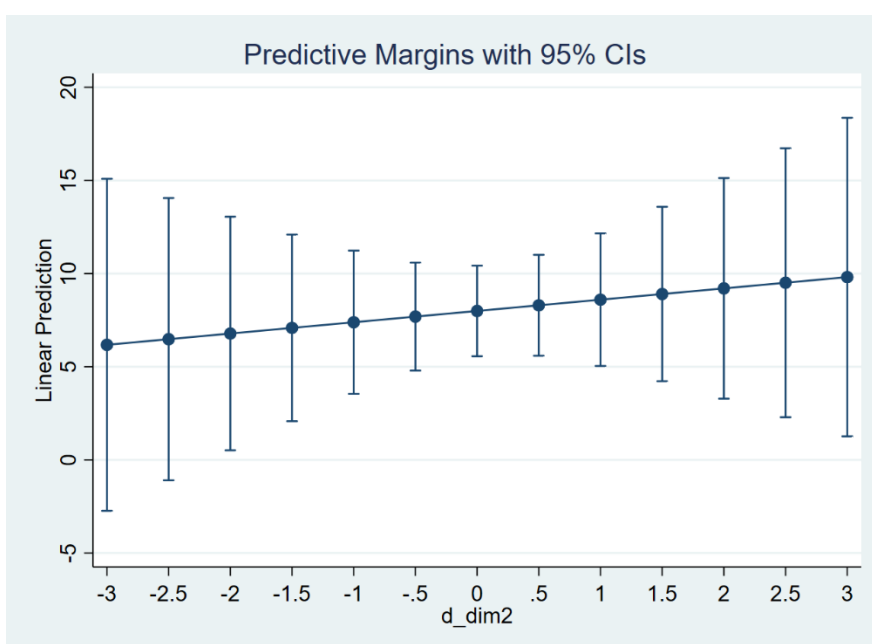


Figure 9 show the vote shares decreasing slightly for the Centre Party when moving towards the center on the primary dimension. As the Centre Party is considered a nonmainstream party, this supports hypothesis 3, where nonmainstream parties are expected to lose vote shares when moderating on their primary dimension. Figure 10 show the Centre Party gaining vote shares when moving away from the center and losing support when moderating on secondary dimension issues. This contradicts hypothesis 2, where parties are expected to gain support when moderating on secondary dimension issues. The results for the Centre Party are also statistically insignificant, as the confidence intervals overlap.

Figure 11: Change in electoral support when changing positions on primary dimension for Green Party.

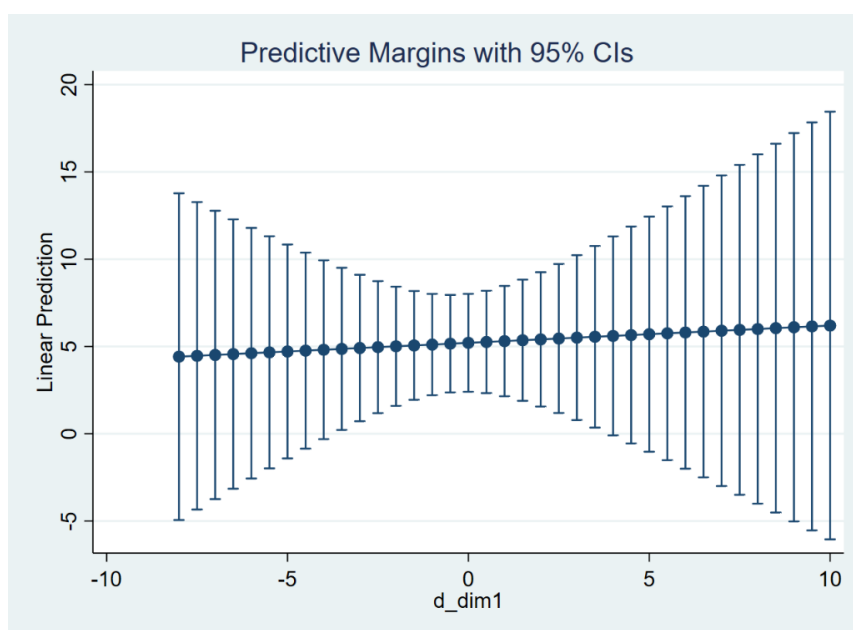


Figure 12: Change in electoral support when changing positions on secondary dimension for the Green Party.

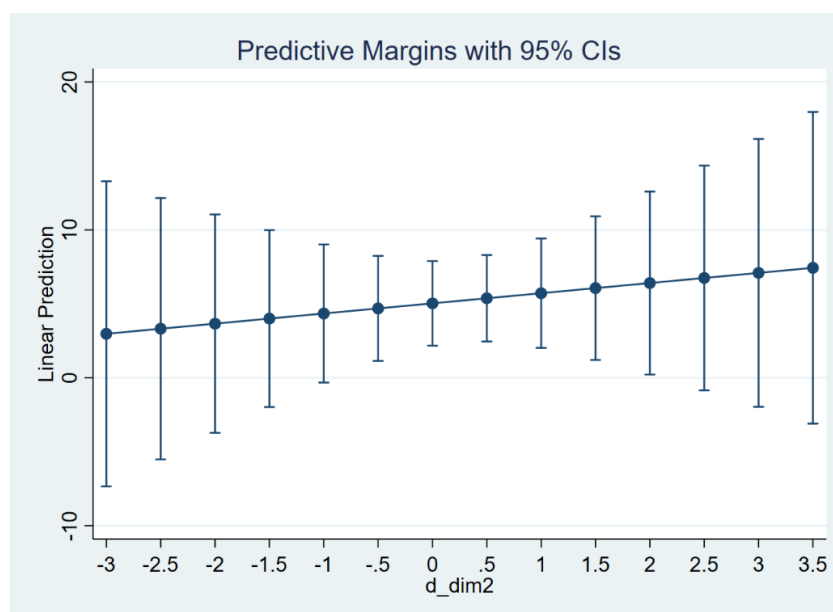


Figure 11 show a slight upward curve when moving toward the center for the Green Party. This contradicts hypothesis 3, where nonmainstream parties are expected to lose vote shares when moving towards the center on primary dimension issues. Figure 12 also show the Green Party gaining votes when moving towards the center. This supports hypothesis 2, where parties are expected to gain votes when moderating on secondary dimension issues. The confidence intervals overlap, however, and the results are not statistically significant

Figure 13: Change in electoral support when changing positions on primary dimension for Christian Democrats.

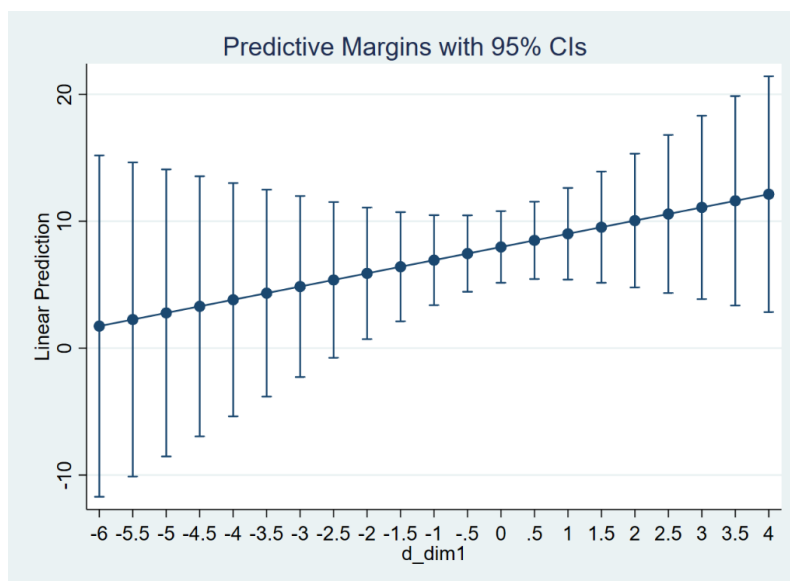


Figure 14: Change in electoral support when changing positions on secondary dimension for Christian Democrats.

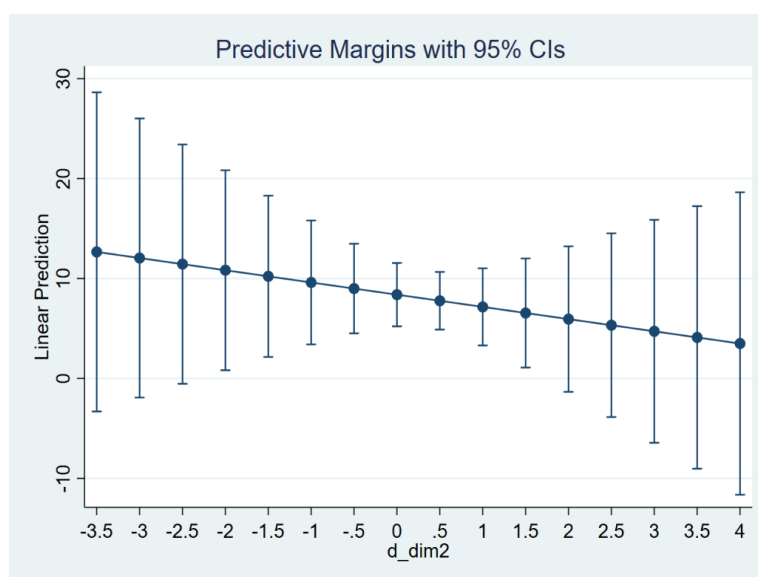


Figure 13 show a fairly strong negative effect for the Christian Democrats when moderating on their primary dimension issues. They seem to gain from moving away from the center on these issues. This contradicts hypothesis 1, where mainstream parties are expected to gain votes from moderating, which is the opposite of what is shown here. Figure 14 show a decline in electoral support for the Christian Democrats when moving away from the center on secondary dimension issues. They gain from moderating on this dimension. This supports both hypothesis 1 and 2, where mainstream parties specifically are expected to gain from

moderating on secondary dimension issues. The results are not statistically significant here either.

7. Conclusion

As can be gathered from the results, several of the hypothesis were supported by the data but the results are not statistically significant. The seemingly random distribution of results between parties also bring unclearness to the result, as there is no set way in which the relationship works between primary and secondary dimension. The parties all show quite different relationships between position changes in primary and secondary dimension and electoral support, which is surprising considering the expectations.

In previous studies on similar subjects, differences have been shown between different party types and party families. The large differences were here thought to be included in the split between mainstream and nonmainstream parties. No such differentiation was found, and the parties have a seemingly random distribution on this relationship. The hypotheses did apply in some cases, but because of the statistical insignificance, and the random distribution between parties, there is no case to be made for these hypotheses being accurate in this paper. The results overall are therefore very interesting, as the expectations in this paper, derived from earlier literature, were not found to be correct, and that for the most part, it seems that there is no clear relation between electoral support and position changes on these dimensions. Thus, electoral support is probably more dependent on other variables, such as perceived valence, charisma of the party leader, etc., which have been put forward by earlier literature as important factors for voters. The statistical insignificance may also be derived from the dimensions in this paper not being correct, and primary and secondary dimension division not being the most optimal in regard to how voters perceive parties and party change. It is, however, unclear in what way this could be optimized without a clear result on how this statistical relationship works in the real world.

As accountability between parties and the voters is generally seen as one of the cornerstones of democracy, seeing that voters don't seem to take into account how parties respond or ignore to public opinion by changing their positions, is a very surprising result. This may feed into an expectation that voters generally don't have a coherent set of political views, and that for most voters, a multitude of variables factor in when voting, and accountability and position mobility of parties are neglected in favor of other, more highly prioritized factors. Presupposing that this result is correct, and that there is in fact no clear relationship between these variables, has important implications for further research. This would mean that voters do not see parties in the way expected in this paper, that other factors take priority, and that the ideological continuity

of parties possibly don't matter in the long run, as long as parties can keep themselves electorally attractive in other aspects. This is partly corresponding to earlier research, which has found it hard to pin down the exact relationship between these variables, or regarding research on this area of political science. It is still, however, a very interesting and surprising result, since some previous studies have shown that voters do, at least partly, take the changes of political parties into account.

There are several issues that might influence the relationship between position change and parties electoral support such as the division of the issues into the two separate dimensions. The choice of what issues are in primary dimensions has been made and argued for by me, and not derived from any specific pre-existing dataset or theory. It seems that voters may take position changes into account less than expected, or that parties are skilled in choosing what to change in, emphasize, and blur their positions on. Other factors may also just be more important when choosing party on election day, such as perceived valence, tradition, charisma of party leader, or that voters are focused mainly on one or a handful of topics, of which only a few parties conform to.

That the hypothesis was not fully confirmed is not a surprise considering the previous literature on the subject, which has come to no clear definitive answer regarding position changes and electoral support. Many eminent political scientists have tackled questions close to mine and gotten no clear answer. Since political competition, position changes, and voter behavior are such complicated topics, a clear answer may not always be possible. Many variables factor into these statistical relationships, and it may not be reasonable to believe that you can easily single these relationships out and analyze them one by one, since so many factors are at all times at play. That parties handle these types of questions differently has also been hinted at in earlier research, e.g. where niche parties cater to their own core voter base, while mainstream parties position themselves to cater to the median voter (Adams et al, 2006). The differentiation in this paper between mainstream and nonmainstream parties does not seem to be enough, and it is clear that further studies fully detailing the relationship is needed.

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